



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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July 14, 2021

To: Members of the Community Preservation Act Committee

From: Charles Sullivan, Cambridge Historical Commission

Re: Potential CPA Application – Winthrop Street Wall

The circa 1800 dry-laid stone retaining wall that runs between Winthrop Street and Eliot Street is a major character-giving feature of Harvard Square. Constructed between 1793 and 1811, it perhaps reflects a failed plan to create a wharf on the Town Creek that would have taken advantage of the newly-opened Middlesex Canal to bring waterborne commerce to Harvard Square.

The Historical Commission has been in communication with the abutting property owners for many years, and all agree that the wall is significant and should be preserved with some degree of public access.

The wall presents difficult questions about maintenance and repairs. Property lines and responsibilities with relation to the wall are unclear. As a dry-laid structure it has always been hospitable to rats. The soil behind the wall is loose till which is susceptible to erosion and movement. Nearby construction has perhaps destabilized some of areas. Most recently, heavy rain events have caused part of the wall to collapse.

One of the owners recently reached out to the Historical Commission staff to see if Community Preservation Act funds could be obtained for reconstruction of the wall, if not for immediate repairs. A permanent solution would probably require taking down the stone blocks, installing a concrete retaining wall, and reconstructing the historic wall. The cost for rebuilding the recently collapsed section might be in the range of \$200,000, but perhaps more.

CPA funds should be made available only on condition that the owners convey an easement to the city that would guarantee preservation of the wall and some form of public access to it. Details of possible arrangements, cost estimates, and owner support will all have to be developed in the near future before the proposal can be submitted for consideration.

cc: Jen Mathews
Raj Dhanda
Paul Overgaag
Banker Real Estate Company

History and Current Condition of the Winthrop Street Wall

The Winthrop Street Wall runs south 91' from Winthrop Street along the west property line of 98 Winthrop, and then turns and runs for 70' in an easterly direction behind 98 and 96 Winthrop Street. It is approximately 10' tall and comprised of partly of puddingstone quarried in Roxbury and partly of granite blocks from an unknown location. The wall is typically battered (sloped) about 1' from bottom to top.

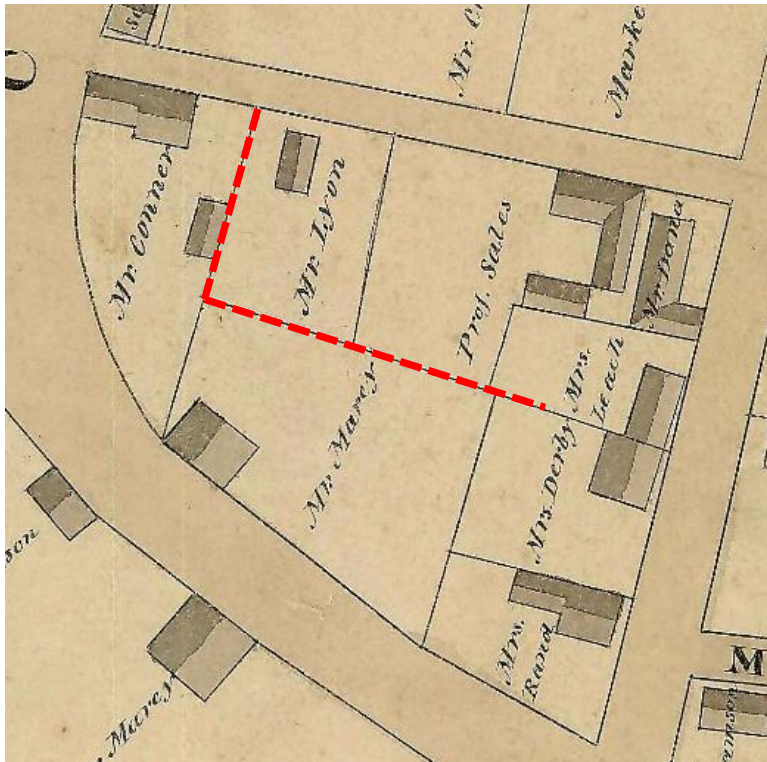


The Cox-Hicks house, 98 Winthrop Street, ca. 1806, before conversion to a restaurant in 2002, with the Winthrop Street retaining wall in the foreground. Photo 2002.

The following is an excerpt from *Building Old Cambridge: Architectural and Development*, p. 121:

The block bounded by Winthrop (Long) and Eliot (Creek) streets shows how the complex layering of history informs land use in present-day Harvard Square. The block emerged from the 18th century with scattered houses owned by substantial tradesmen, but it soon became the focus of a major development project with an uncertain goal. During the period of intense speculation caused by the completion of the West Boston Bridge in 1793 and the opening of the Middlesex Canal ten years later, unknown parties built the 10-foot-high dry-laid granite and Roxbury puddingstone wall and created level land adjacent to the Town Creek (Eliot Street).

Thomas Brattle acquired all the lots that now adjoin the wall between 1794 and 1797, perhaps meaning to dredge the creek to create a canal like those near Kendall Square. Francis Dana Jr., son of Chief Justice Dana, promoter of the West Boston Bridge, and sixteen investors purchased the lots after Brattle's death in 1806. This group could have built the wall, or they could have been acting preemptively, to prevent development of a wharf that would adversely affect their interests in Cambridgeport (much as they were engaged in struggles with Andrew Craigie over roads). In any event, Dana and his associates began to sell out in 1811, leaving the wall to mystify future historians.



Winthrop Street in 1833, with the retaining wall indicated.
 Alexander Wadsworth, *Plan of the Village in Old Cambridge* (1833)



Winthrop Street wall as seen from Eliot Street, 1909

CHC



October 29, 2020. The stones in the foreground were temporarily removed for Galeria construction. The site of the collapse is in the middle distance.



Sept. 3, 2020



July 13, 2021